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Low Wages and No Dignity: Russian Workers Reflect on the Stark Post-Soviet Choices in Blue-Collar Employment

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Abstract

This Tale from the Field focuses on the interpretation by workers of the precarious nature of blue-collar formal employment in Russia. In an ethnographic sketch based on over two years in the field, I follow an individual, Sergei, as he relies more and more on informal and other sources of income instead of waged labour in the increasing number of multi-national enterprises which have come to Russia to set up factories. Why does Sergei, and many like him, still young or without memory of Soviet labour practices, ‘choose’ exit from the formal economy at the very moment when wages and conditions are finally increasing? Why is the informal economy as a ‘choice’ so important to blue-collar workers despite the hunger for labour in traditional production industry?

I have known Sasha¹ for more than ten years, long before I started doing ethnography on the lived experience of workers in Russia. At first he was my summer-house neighbor in a *dacha* village of rickety wooden houses fifteen miles from town. He’d just come back from the army and was keen to get a job in the local cement factory with his father-in-law. Young men returning from conscripted service eagerly looked forward to the manhood they would attain when they got a “proper” wage in a “proper” job—either at the cement works or in extractive industries in the region. Even though at the time, in the mid-1990s, massive deindustrialization was apace, for a fit young man who showed his willingness to work, there was no shortage of manual labor.

Later on we got to know each other better; Sasha and his family (a wife and two children) would share their summer evening meals with me, and talk would turn to work, to the shop floor, and to the changing labor conditions in Russia. Sasha had worked as a forklift driver for the large cement works, then in a linoleum rolling plant, and, finally, in the new foreign-owned automobile plant. The economy had been growing quickly since the late 1990s, and there was a boom in manufacturing and industry.

When I finally returned to the region in 2009 to do an ethnography of blue-collar workers, it was naturally Sasha to whom I turned. However, much had changed in the intervening years. Gone was his enthusiasm for factory work. More often in my visits to the town, a three-hour bus ride south of Moscow, I would bump into Sasha as he sat moonlighting in his car next to the dusty and dirty bus station. “Aren’t you working?” I would ask him—meaning at the factory, not as a gypsy cab driver. We would sit in his “taxi” (his

Russian-built family car with a magnetic taxi sign on the roof and a CB radio installed) and wait in vain for a two-dollar fare to the other side of town. Sometimes there was only one fare a day. Often Sasha quit after a few hours to go fishing (both for self-provision and to get away from his family's one-room flat). Frequently the family lived for months at a time on his wife's tiny salary as a school teacher. Despite all these "insults" to his pride as a breadwinner, Sasha would not return to the factories, at least not full time. Slowly but surely Sasha was attempting to extract himself, body and soul, from formal "normative" labor.

My ethnographic sketch takes up the story in 2009, and follows the next two years of Sasha's life as he relies more and more on informal and other sources of income like taxi-driving, in place of waged labor in the growing number of multinational enterprises that have come to Russia to set up factories. Why does Sasha, and many like him—still young or without memory of Soviet labor practices—"choose" to exit from the formal Russian economy at the very moment when that economy is booming? Why is the informal economy so important to blue-collar workers as an alternative, despite the demand for laborers in traditional production industries?

Before answering that question, it is worth assessing the variety of informal economic activities available to blue-collar workers in provincial Russia. Gypsy cab-driving is a stop gap for most and pin money for many, especially pensioners. It is something that offers flexibility and an excuse to be out of the house, but it doesn't pay. It's dangerous, too—two drivers were murdered last year for their paltry earnings. As a gypsy driver, you have to pay a fee to the dispatchers, who are also working informally. You are not insured to pick up passengers; you have to be very careful not to encroach on the territory of other drivers, official or otherwise. If you stray too far afield with your "taxi" sign up, you are a sitting duck for extortion from the police. On the other hand, if you get a long-distance trip—overnight to Moscow, say—then you might make in two days what you'd earn in two months of local driving, or a third of the monthly wages of a factory worker.

In the summer there is day laboring, but that's not much better. Unless you've got proven, vouched-for skills, then you're going to be pushing a barrow full of cement all day. There are plenty of Central Asians living in basements or on the private estates of the elite prepared to do that for a dollar a day. The best bet by far is building up a network of contacts (including happy customers) as a tradesman—Sasha's father-in-law, Dima, worked as a spot welder at the cement works for many years before breaking out on his own to install and fix domestic central-heating systems. This is the huge "own-account" sector of the informal, economy of skilled workers in Russia. It pays three or four times better than the same work in a factory. Sasha's family lives in a small town, but word of mouth travels fast even in the provinces, and Dima often travels up to a hundred kilometers to work.

There are also unofficial shop floors, mirroring legal entities in terms of activity, but they are full of unregistered and wholly informal collectives of

blue-collar workers. Boris, a distant relative by marriage to Sasha, works in one of these. He does a ten-hour shift in an unheated workshop sublet from a defunct factory in the sprawling, mainly abandoned, industrial zone of the town. His collective pays the absent Moscow owner for power and rent. A dozen men labor here at lathes and stands, all trusted acquaintances and former factory colleagues. They turn out high-quality uPVC double glazing, cutting aluminum frames to custom size with rented Turkish equipment. Quickly, without fuss, they busy themselves inserting double glazing units, shipping and installing them in three or four nearby towns. Officially none of this economic activity exists.

Sasha, Boris, and I are sitting in Dima's embarrassingly spacious flat. We are talking about getting by and helping others and being helped: from salting fish for neighbors, to acquaintances' spot welding automobile floor pans in exchange for some other service.

If you can't rely on your relatives and friends, then you may as well be dead or one of those Muscovites, who'd sell their own grandmother to get ahead. And what do they get? They don't even know how to spend all that money swilling around in the capital.

We're eating Sasha's dried and salted fish and drinking beer bought by his father-in-law. Dima brought up Sasha as his own son, instilling in him the values of hard work and just reward. The socialist era was good to people like him; if you didn't work, you didn't eat. Yes, conditions were tough. Dima had to work weekends as a "volunteer" alongside convict labor to build the block of flats we're now sitting in. But it was worth it. Look: 80 square meters of space, all Dima's own. But what about Sasha, I ask. Where is his reward? Sasha was 17 in 1991. Then "everything got carved up by the crooked businessmen and politicians," interjects Dima angrily, the beer taking effect. "Anyway, he'll get this flat soon enough, when we're all dead."

"Tell him about the old times, when it was good, when the kind giants lived," says Sasha, half jokingly, half seriously. Dima paints a vivid picture of the "deal" with labor in the socialist era: housing, good pay, and benefits. Conditions in the lime kiln and quarries were dangerous and unhealthy, but considering the previous generation's experience of war, young men like Dima (born in 1954) understood their position, not as building socialism—that was a good joke for the intellectuals to lap up—but as building their own community of workers and getting a just reward. The regime arrogated the language of class in everything: a state built by workers for workers. But the transparency of repression and the failure of socialism to live up to its billing did not prevent then, and does not prevent now, laboring subjectivities to harvest a sense of dignity arising out of their positioning and hailing as first among equals within the experiment that failed. I counter, some of this is nostalgia, surely? Dima gets animated again: "How many times a week did we get meat, Sonny?" He turns to Sasha for support. Sasha, at first timidly, but then with more confidence, takes up the theme.

Well, I remember we always had pork, when in the city it was hard to come by. And, you could go to the cafeteria and everyone knew you there. The kiln and quarrymen always got the best pies. You came in dusty, and for twenty kopecks you took what you wanted. And then the village schools still worked, so the town school wasn't so overburdened. And the factory took care of you in the hospital.

And so on and so forth. Sasha, who has only the second-hand experience of these bygone social facts, paints a more or less accurate picture of the social wage of the industrial worker that is now so obviously missing, but which lives on in the kitchen-table talk of men of all ages.²

The loss of the social wage under socialism is only one artifact of labor's memory and narrative of self to which Sasha has access, thanks to kin and peers. Sometime *confreres*, whose acquaintance was forged in the lime kiln and quarry, often long ago, still meet up and chew over the relationship of the past to present. This can take place at the taxi stand on the bus station square, in the garages that serve as social spaces for the performance of masculine sociality, and after hours in the workshops and yards of factories, which then become the domain of workers—for hanging out when there is nowhere else to go. Now I am in one such garage with Sasha and three workers from the unregistered uPVC workshop. Another two burly guys are trying to replace a car's axle, mainly by using brute force. French pop music is blaring from the hi-fi. A kettle boils in a corner, but the five of us sitting on a moldy divan and some armchairs are concentrating on the four litres of vodka in front of us. Zhenya, the owner of the car, has recently started work at one of the foreign automobile plants, glittering prizes in the industrial policy of the region's governor. Just outside the capital and working full tilt, the factories churn out high-quality cars to meet European and domestic demand. Zhenya went to school with Sasha's younger brother. They share a passion for tinkering, more or less successfully, with their Russian-made *Ladas*. Unlike the shiny cars from the new plant, the *Ladas* are affordable, practical, and domestically mendable, should they come to grief on the infamously poor roads of provincial Russia.

Zhenya is waxing lyrical about the pristine, space-age cleanliness of the plant. Training there is hands on—they even have a real car they try you out on during the aptitude testing process; there are real-life foreigners there to stop you from making a mistake, with interpreters standing by. You get a uniform, and there is even a launderette so that you are always clean looking! The food in the canteen is excellent, too. They even built their own road there from the arterial one, the Russian one. It is like being in another country, complete with barbed-wire perimeter.

This is the boiled-down version of Zhenya's description. Reactions differ. Zhenya's mate, his feet sticking out from under the car, makes encouraging noises. He also considered work at the plant but thinks he'll be better off for the time being welding and spraying cars, like this one, for cash. Sitting next to me is Kolya, the only informant with a higher technical education; he is an electrician, now at the uPVC outfit. He seems impressed by the description

but is quick to remark on the relatively low level of pay at the plant: “You’d have thought that after the governor subsidized the plant, they’d maybe consider paying European wages, but no. Zhenya, how do you feel about getting less than half what a Slovak gets back home? And the cafeteria isn’t subsidized. And you have to buy your own overalls.”

Zhenya is a little taken aback by this; he hadn’t thought about it like that. “The Slovaks are okay, they are like intermediaries. They’re the only foreigners who can understand us and try to help.”

Kolya continues calmly: “You know I heard that the Romanians,³ you know, they like to do things properly. Well, they wanted to pay us the same as the plants in Europe. The governor says, ‘Okay, no problem.’ He thinks that factory work pays shit everywhere, even in the West. Then he finds out that they pay 2000 Euro a month [\$2,600] and he shits himself. ‘You can’t pay a Russian that!’ And he makes a deal that they’ll only pay half.”⁴

Sasha looks like thunder: “We’re supposed to be the Russian Singapore⁵ now, but even the Brazilians get a better deal!” Suddenly everyone is quiet. They’d forgotten that Sasha had tried out at the automobile plant for three months before quitting last year. It hadn’t gone well for him, and he proceeds to tell Zhenya and the others his story, one that we’d heard versions of before.

When Sasha had arrived at the plant, they’d set him to unpacking crates and counting parts. He understood this as a kind of “test” of his resolve. After all, he was a bit older than many of the conveyor workers. The Europeans had already learned, to their detriment, that Russia is not Slovakia, or even Brazil—the home of the model plant that the Russians were supposed to emulate—and outperform: “For every 1,000 workers they take on, 500 leave,” Sasha intoned. I had heard similar descriptions of the high turnover of staff in all the automotive plants and subsidiaries in Kaluga. Some versions described net outflows of workers forcing the plants to rely on agency labor—the cause of an unprecedented wave of wild-cat strikes in 2011. Sasha had finally got on the assembly line after a long probation period in Deliveries but soon got into conflict with the management over his unorthodox resourcefulness on the line. Instead of following the set order of chassis assembly, Sasha had cut corners to work faster and had been reprimanded as a result.

“For a start you need to look at the salary and benefits,” Sasha continued. “They talk about subsidized transport and the canteen and the dental insurance” (here he smiled widely showing his Soviet-era gold fillings), “but when you look at the real payment compared to other conveyor work, or spot welding, or computer-numeric controlled lathes, say in the turbine plant, where’s the advantage? None of them pay more than 20,000Rb a month [\$700]. At least at the turbine, or here in town at the steel plant, I can get time off—they meet me halfway if little Natasha is ill and I have to stop home. And you remember the operation I had on my back? And the loan for the car the boss gave me?”

Sasha had worked for a couple of years at a steel-fabricating plant, an inheritor business of the huge Soviet-era factory complex. This local business,

having to compete for labor, offered a relatively good “social packet” to its workers,⁶ including personal loans and unofficial help with medical costs. He had moved on to the automotive plant in the vain hope of better wages.

He continued, “But even the big boys don’t want to *give anything* in exchange for a twelve-hour [shift] on the conveyor. They don’t understand it isn’t just about the wages. It’s about conditions and how they treat you. The tempo at the car plant is ‘bang, bang, bang.’ You can’t keep up without cutting corners—using your head. They talk about ‘worker initiative,’ but that’s bull. And then you get an earful. Why should I kill myself like that, knowing that in five years I’ll have the same miserly wage and only the ‘connected’ workers will get ahead?”

Sasha’s inventiveness had led him to carry in his overalls a large number of small parts that were supposed to be collected separately for each chassis. His shortcut allowed him to work faster and complete his section earlier but, on seeing this, the supervisor had written him up for rule-breaking and disrupting the line. Kolya, knowing the story already, comments: “They punished you because they are so scared of us Russians stealing the parts. At the factory gate they can shake you down more thoroughly than the cops can.”

Then the conversation takes a different tack entirely, turning to another lucrative alternative to formal work: trading in stolen car parts. At first bewildered by its see-saw between pay, benefits, and shop-floor relations, over the weeks of further “shop-talk” that follow, I gain, incrementally, a clearer understanding of the multiple but imbricated articulations by workers of their formal work critique. During such talk—in the garages, vegetable plots, and kitchens (there are no bars left in this town)—men chew over their dispossession from what they see as the “dignified” labor of the previous era. The new emphasis on the “flexible worker” is seen as much as an exploitative sham as the “worker’s state” rhetoric of the past. However, at least in those days, some kind of shop-floor autonomy and give-and-take existed, along with a living wage and social protections.

Sweated labor is the norm in the bright new factories of Russia, whether owned domestically or not. Changes in the compact between labor and capital auger more intrusive supervision of production, an audit culture, and the expectation of self-exploitation—just like anywhere else infected with the *deus deceptor* of neoliberalism. But not everyone is deceived. While just as “precarious” for households, informal economic activity at least presents the opportunity for some autonomy of labor, for valued sociality, indeed solidarity of blue-collar workers, in contrast to the atomized and nonunionized mass of waged workers. There is at least some hope that Russian workers, used to the ideologically charged meanings of labor, are in some respects equipped to sustain alternative, socially embedded narratives of the meaning and value of their own work that are not so easily coopted by the narrative of the deserving quiescent worker.

NOTES

1. All names and the descriptions of some industrial activities have been changed to protect the identities of informants.

2. The interpretation here recalls Burawoy's analysis of "negative class consciousness" among late-socialist era Hungarian workers, where cynicism about the teleological project of socialism did not prevent class-based solidarity, see Michael Burawoy, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (With János Lukács), 83–139.

3. A racially dubious in-joke by locals on the identity of the European plant owners: "They're all the same: Romanians," regardless of the nationality (Japanese, German, Swedish, Slovak, and French) of supervisors at the plants. For obvious reasons, I obscure the identity of the plant discussed here.

4. Actually, assembly-line pay is substantially less than \$1,000 a month. Zhenya's comparison of pay and conditions in Russian multinational-owned factories to analogous labor abroad was in no way an isolated example. Workers would often compare wages to the price of automobiles to calculate how many years' wages would pay for a car. The region's politicians took the charge of a conspiracy to keep down wages so seriously that they officially denied it in the media.

5. The region's governor, citing the large inward investment from foreign countries, had compared Kaluga to Singapore.

6. The official and legally required minimum social protection an employer offers as part of an employment agreement.